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Working Mothers and Their Children

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One of the most striking demographic changes that has taken place in the post-World War II era has been the increase in labor force participation of women with children under 18 years of age. Since the period immediately preceding World War II, the number of women workers has more than doubled but the number of working mothers has increased more than tenfold.

Nearly half (49 percent) of all mothers were in the labor force in March 1976 compared with 35 percent in 1965, 27 percent in 1955, and only 9 percent in 1940. Although the labor force participation rates of all women have increased markedly in the postwar era, the growth among mothers has been substantially larger, so that by 1976 their rate actually surpassed that for all women.

Working mothers make substantial contributions to the Nation's economy as well as to family income. In many instances these working women raise family income above the poverty level. Among those working mothers with husbands present, 20 percent had husbands whose incomes were below $7,000 in 1975. Also, income is of crucial importance to a significant number of women who are raising children in homes where the father is absent; 2.9 million working mothers were widowed, divorced, or separated in 1976.

Nearly half (46 percent) of all children under 18 years of age have mothers in the work force. While the number of children in the population has declined sharply since 1970, the number of children with working mothers has risen considerably--by 2.7 million.

MOTHERS IN THE LABOR FORCE

Of the nearly 38 million women in the labor force in March 1976, 14.6 million had children under 18 years of age. Some 9.2 million of these mothers had children 6 to 17 years of age only, representing over three-fifths of all working mothers. About 5.4 million had children under age 6,1/ accounting for nearly two-fifths of all working mothers. Of these mothers, 2.8 million had children 3 to 5 years and 2.5 million had children under 3 years of age.

Mothers with husbands absent (widowed, divorced, separated) were more likely to be in the labor force than were those with husbands present, regardless of the ages of their children. Even with very young children (under 6 years of age), mothers with husbands absent had a labor force participation rate of 56 percent; the rate for those with husbands present was 37 percent (table 1).

1/ May also have older children.

Note: "Mothers" refers to those with children under 18 years of age. Unless otherwise indicated, data are for March 1976 and apply to women 16 years of age and over.

Table 1.--Mothers in the Labor Force, by Marital Status of Mother and Age of Children, March 1976

(Mothers 16 years of age and over)

Marital status of mother and age of children	Number (in thousands)	Percent distribution	As percent of all ever-married women in the population
Mothers with children under 18 years	14,598	100.0	48.8
Married, husband present	11,693	80.1	46.1
Widowed, divorced, or separated	2,904	19.9	63.8
Mothers with children 6 to 17 years only	9,239	63.3	56.2
Married, husband present	7,270	49.8	53.7
Widowed, divorced, or separated	1,970	13.5	68.1
Mothers with children under 6 years 1/	5,358	36.7	39.7
Married, husband present	4,424	30.3	37.4
Widowed, divorced, or separated	935	6.4	56.2
Mothers with children 3 to 5 years (none under 3) 1/	2,827	19.4	47.2
Married, husband present	2,227	15.3	44.1
Widowed, divorced, separated	600	4.1	63.4
Mothers with children under 3 years 1/	2,531	17.3	33.8
Married, husband present	2,197	15.1	32.4
Widowed, divorced, or separated	335	2.3	46.7

1/ May also have older children.

Minority Mothers 2/

Of the 5.0 million minority women workers, nearly 2.2 million were mothers of children under 18 years of age. About 1.2 million of these mothers had children 6 to 17 years only, and 944,000 had children under the age of 6 (table 2).

Table 2.--Minority Mothers in the Labor Force, by Marital Status of Mother and Age of Children, March 1976

(Mothers 16 years of age and over)

Marital status of mother and age of children	Number (in thousands)	Percent distribution	As percent of ever-married women in the population
Mothers with children under 18 years	2,154	100.0	58.1
Married, husband present	1,438	66.8	58.3
Widowed, divorced, or separated	716	33.2	57.7
Mothers with children 6 to 17 years only	1,210	56.2	62.4
Married, husband present	753	35.0	63.8
Widowed, divorced, or separated	457	21.2	60.3
Mothers with children under 6 years 1/	944	43.8	53.3
Married, husband present	684	31.8	53.2
Widowed, divorced, or separated	259	12.0	53.8

1/ May also have older children.

In contrast to all mothers, the participation rates of minority mothers with children under 6 were about the same for those with husbands present and husbands absent--53 and 54 percent, respectively.

2/ Includes those of all races other than white. Spanish-origin mothers are included in the white population.

Trends in Labor Force Participation

Between 1940 and 1976 the labor force participation rate of mothers increased more than fivefold, reflecting the most significant change in the labor force this country has ever experienced. In 1940 the 28-percent rate of all women was over three times the 9-percent rate of all mothers. However, by 1976 the situation had changed dramatically. The rate for mothers, at 49 percent, was 2 percentage points higher than that for all women (table 3).

Table 3.--Labor Force Participation Rates of Mothers and All Women,1/ Selected Years, 1940-1976

Year	Mothers 2/	All women 3/
1976	48.8	46.8
1975	47.4	46.3
1974	45.7	45.6
1972	42.9	43.9
1970	42.0	43.3
1968	39.4	41.6
1966	35.8	38.9
1964	34.5	37.4
1962	32.9	36.6
1960	30.4	36.7
1958	29.5	36.0
1956	27.5	35.9
1954	25.6	33.7
1952	23.8	33.8
1950	21.6	33.1
1948	20.2	31.9
1946	18.2	31.2
1940	8.6	28.2

1/ Includes women 16 years of age and over for 1968-1976 and 14 years and over prior to 1968.

2/ Data are for March except 1946-1954, which are for April.

3/ Annual averages.

Although the presence of very young children in the home tends to affect the labor force participation of mothers, an increasing proportion of these mothers are entering the work force. For example, from 1971 to 1976 the labor force participation rate of mothers with children under 3 years of age rose 7 percentage points--from 27 to 34 percent; for those with children 3 to 5 years the rate increased 9 percentage points--from 38 to 47 percent. However, the rate for mothers with children 6 to 17 rose only 4 percentage points over the 5-year period--from 52 to 56 percent. In 1960 the labor force participation rate of mothers with children under 3 was 17 percent; with children 3 to 5, 27 percent; and with children 6 to 17, 43 percent.

Age

The median age of working mothers was 35 years--the same as that of all women workers. Slightly over one-fourth (26 percent) of all working mothers were between 25 and 34 years of age, and nearly one-fourth (22 percent) were between 35 and 44 (table 4).

Table 4.--Ever-Married Women 1/ in the Labor Force, by Age Group, March 1976

Age group	Number in labor force (in thousands)	Percent distribution	As percent of all ever-married women in the population
16 years of age and over	28,734	100.0	43.9
16 to 24 years	3,648	12.7	55.0
25 to 34 years	7,497	26.1	53.2
35 to 44 years	6,386	22.2	57.2
45 years and over	11,204	39.0	33.4

1/ Ever-married women with children under 18 years of age.

Work Experience

Among mothers (husband present) with work experience in 1975, those with children aged 6 to 17 were more likely to be working on full-time schedules 3/ than were those with preschool-age children (under 6). Of the total number with children 6 to 17 years old, 4.9 million were on full-time schedules, with 64 percent working year round (table 5). Of the mothers with children under 6 years of age, 3.6 million were on full-time schedules but only 40 percent worked 50 to 52 weeks.

About 3.1 million mothers with children 6 to 17 years of age were on part-time schedules 4/; 2.1 million (68 percent) of them worked 27 weeks or more. Of the 2.0 million part timers with children under 6, half worked 27 weeks or more.

Unemployment

The 8.6-percent unemployment rate of mothers was higher than that of all ever-married women (7.5 percent) but was about the same as that of all women workers (8.5 percent). The rate of married women with husbands present was 7.9 percent, substantially lower than the 11.3 percent for those who were widowed, divorced, or separated. Mothers who had children under age 6 and whose husbands were present in the home were unemployed at a rate of 11.2 percent, considerably lower than the 16.9 percent rate for mothers with husbands absent (table 6).

Occupations

The occupational distribution of working mothers with husbands present was quite similar to that of all women in March 1975 (latest date for which data are available). Among working mothers, 34 percent were clerical workers, 18 percent were service workers (except private household), 17 percent were in professional and technical jobs, and 13 percent were operatives. Only 5 percent were managers and administrators (table 7).

3/ Worked 35 hours or more a week during a majority of the weeks worked.

4/ Worked less than 35 hours a week during a majority of the weeks worked.

Table 5.--Work Experience in 1975 of Married Women (Husband Present), by Presence and Age of Children, March 1976

(Numbers in thousands)

Presence and age of children	Percent of civilian non-institutional population with work experience	Total	Worked full time 1/				Worked part time 2/		
			Total	50 to 52 weeks	27 to 49 weeks	1 to 26 weeks	Total	27 weeks or more	1 to 26 weeks
No children under 18 years	49.4	11,118	8,148	5,656	1,378	1,114	2,970	2,087	883
Children 6 to 17 years only	59.5	8,058	4,947	3,175	928	844	3,111	2,121	990
Children 3 to 5 years (none under 3) 3/	50.7	2,558	1,566	800	333	434	991	553	438
Children under 3 years 3/	44.3	3,003	1,990	605	552	832	1,013	453	560

1/ Worked 35 hours or more a week during a majority of the weeks worked.
2/ Worked less than 35 hours a week during a majority of the weeks worked.
3/ May also have older children.

Table 6.--Employment Status of Ever-Married Women 16 Years of Age and Over, by Presence and Age of Children, March 1976

(Numbers in thousands)

Employment status	Total	No children under 18 years	Children under 18				
			Total	6 to 17 years only	Under 6 years 1/		
					Total	3 to 5 years, none under 3	Under 3 years
All ever-married women	65,425	35,509	29,916	16,434	13,482	5,990	7,491
In labor force	28,734	14,137	14,598	9,239	5,358	2,827	2,531
Unemployed	2,149	897	1,252	599	654	276	378
Unemployment rate	7.5	6.3	8.6	6.5	12.2	9.8	14.9
Married (husband present)	47,852	22,490	25,361	13,543	11,819	5,044	6,774
In labor force	21,554	9,860	11,693	7,270	4,424	2,227	2,197
Unemployed	1,530	607	923	427	496	193	303
Unemployment rate	7.1	6.2	7.9	5.9	11.2	8.7	13.8
Widowed, divorced, or separated	17,573	13,019	4,554	2,891	1,663	946	717
In labor force	7,181	4,276	2,904	1,970	935	600	335
Unemployed	619	290	329	171	158	83	75
Unemployment rate	8.6	6.8	11.3	8.7	16.9	13.9	22.3

1/ May also have older children.

Table 7.--Occupational Distribution of Working Mothers (Husband Present), by Age of Children, March 1975

Occupation group	Children		
	Under 18 years	6 to 17 years	Under 6 years 1/
Total (in thousands)	10,286	6,465	3,821
Percent	100.0	100.0	100.0
Professional and technical workers	17.4	16.4	18.9
Manager and administrators, nonfarm	4.7	5.4	3.4
Sales workers	6.8	7.1	6.2
Clerical workers	34.4	35.3	32.7
Craft and kindred workers	1.7	2.0	1.4
Operatives, including transport	13.1	12.8	13.8
Service workers (except private household)	17.7	17.0	18.9
Private household workers	2.1	1.9	2.6
Farmers and farm managers	0.3	0.3	0.3
Farm laborers and supervisors	1.0	1.0	0.9
Laborers, nonfarm	0.8	0.7	0.9

1/ May also have older children.

INCOME OF HUSBANDS

A significant proportion of working mothers have husbands whose incomes are below the low-income or poverty level.5/ In fact, among the 11.7 million working mothers with husbands present, 2.3 million had husbands whose 1975 incomes were below $7,000. Included were 595,000 whose husbands had incomes below $3,000; 671,000 whose husbands had incomes between $3,000 and $5,000; and about 1 million whose husbands had incomes between $5,000 and $7.000.

Among working mothers with school-age children (6 to 17), 1.2 million had husbands with incomes below $7,000; almost as many (1.0 million) with preschoolers had husbands in that income bracket.

5/ The low-income or poverty level is based on the Social Security Administration's poverty thresholds, adjusted annually in accordance with changes in the Department of Labor's Consumer Price Index. Classified as poor in 1975 were those nonfarm households where total money income was less than $2,724 for an unrelated individual; $3,506 for a couple; and $5,500 for a family of four. (The poverty level for farm families is set at 85 percent of the corresponding levels for nonfarm families.)

Among minority mothers in the labor force, about 475,000 (33 percent) had husbands with 1975 incomes below $7,000. Of these mothers, 102,000 had husbands with incomes below $3,000; 158,000, between $3,000 and $5,000; and 216,000, between $5,000 and $7,000. About 265,000 minority mothers with school-age children and 210,000 with preschoolers had husbands whose incomes were below $7,000.

CHILDREN OF WORKING MOTHERS

Of the 61.7 million children under 18 years of age, 28.2 million (46 percent of all children under 18 years) had mothers in the labor force (table 8). Although the total number of children in the population has decreased by 4.1 million since 1970 (a result of the overall decline in the birth rate), the number of children with mothers in the labor force has risen by 2.6 million. The increase occurred mostly in female-head families--1.7 million; in husband-wife families the increase was 886,000.

Among families with school-age children only (6 to 17 years), the increase in the number of children with working mothers was also greater in female-head families, where the number rose by 1.3 million. In husband-wife families the increase was 453,000. However, among families with preschool-age children (under 6 years), the increase since 1970 in the number of children with mothers in the labor force was slightly greater in husband-wife families (433,000) than in female-head families (416,000).

Table 8.--Number of Children Under 18 Years Old, by Age, Type of Family, and Labor Force Status of Mother, March 1970 and 1976

Type of family and labor force status of mother	Number of children, 1976 (in thousands)			Number of children, 1970 (in thousands)		
	Under 18 years	6 to 17 years	Under 6 years	Under 18 years	6 to 17 years	Under 6 years
Total Children 1/	61,697	44,058	17,639	65,755	46,149	19,606
Mother in labor force	28,159	21,720	6,439	25,544	19,954	5,590
Mother not in labor force	32,828	21,708	11,120	39,550	25,627	13,923
Husband-wife families	51,586	36,255	15,332	58,399	40,479	17,920
Mother in labor force	22,868	17,488	5,380	21,982	17,035	4,947
Mother not in labor force	28,718	18,767	9,952	36,417	23,444	12,973
Female-head families 2/	9,401	7,173	2,227	6,695	5,102	1,593
Mother in labor force	5,291	4,232	1,059	3,562	2,919	643
Mother not in labor force	4,110	2,942	1,168	3,133	2,183	950

1/ Children are defined as "own" children of the family head and include never married sons and daughters, stepchildren, and adopted children.

2/ Family heads are widowed, divorced, separated, or single.

CHILD CARE ARRANGEMENTS

Of particular concern today is the availability and quality of child care arrangements which are offered working mothers. With the increase in labor force participation of mothers, especially those with children under 6, there is a growing need for lower cost and more readily available day care facilities for children in the formative years. In 1975 there were over 16 million children 3 to 13 years old of working mothers, but only 279,000 (1.7 percent) were enrolled in group care centers (table 9).

Table 9.--Child Care Arrangements, by Number and Age of Children of Employed Mothers, 1975

(Numbers in thousands)

Arrangement	Children		
	3 to 13 years	3 to 6 years	7 to 13 years
Total children	16,046	4,658	11,388
Care in own home	13,354	3,027	10,327
Child's parents	9,797	2,514	7,283
Child cares for self	1,595	20	1,575
Other relative	1,504	346	1,158
Nonrelative	458	147	311
Care in someone else's home	2,097	1,342	755
Relative	932	570	362
Nonrelative	1,165	772	393
Group care center	279	193	86
Other	72	--	72
Not reported	247	98	149

Despite the rising trend in mothers' labor force participation, studies characteristically find that the presence of young children in the home tends to be an inhibiting factor in the mother's labor force activity. It would seem to follow that expanding day care facilities would not only permit more women with young children to enter the job market in search of work, if they so wish, but would also alleviate many of the difficulties that mothers who presently work have in arranging for the care of their children.

Source: Data in this report are from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, and U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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